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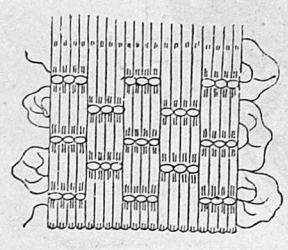
Art Needlework

CHURCH EMBROIDERY.

PREPARATORY to a series of fully-illustrated articles on church embroidery which we purpose giving our readers, it may be well to say something concerning the stitches especially useful for this kind of work. These stitches are quite simple. They include the varieties known as the ordinary "laid backgrounds," "diaper couchings," "brick stitch," "basket stitch," and the various forms of stuffed couchings which are found in ancient embroideries. Couching outlines are usually thick strands of double crewel, tapestry wool, filosel, cord, or narrow ribbon, laid down and stitched at regular intervals by threads crossing the couching line at right angles. They are used for coarse outline work, or for finishing the edges of appliqué.

In plain couching, or "laid embroidery," the threads are first laid evenly and straight from side to side of the space to be filled in, whether in the direction of warp or woof depends on the pattern; the needle being passed through to the back, and brought up again, not quite close, but at a sufficient distance to allow of an intermediate stitch being taken backward; thus the threads would be laid alternately first, third, second, fourth, and so on. This gives a better purchase at each end than if they were laid consecutively in a straight line. If the line slants much, it is not necessary to alternate the rows. When the layer is complete, threads of metal, of the same or of different color and texture, are laid across at regular intervals, and are fixed down by stitches from the back. The beauty of this work depends upon its regularity.



BASKET STITCH.

This kind of embroidery, which we find among the old Spanish, Cretan, and Italian specimens, is very useful where broad, flat effects without shading are required; but unless it is very closely stitched down, it is not durable if there is any risk of its being exposed to rough usage. Ancient embroidery can be beautifully restored by grounding in "laid work," instead of transferring it, where the ground is frayed, and the work is worthy of preservation. It must be stretched on a new backing, the frayed material carefully cut away, and the new ground couched as we have described. In other varieties of couching, under which come the many forms of diapering, the threads are "laid" in the same manner as for ordinary couching; but in place of laying couching lines across these, the threads of the first layer are simply stitched down from the back, frequently with threads of another color.

In net-patterned couching the fastening stitches are placed diagonally instead of at right angles, forming a network, and are kept in place by a cross-stitch at each intersection. This couching was used as a ground in work of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In brick stitch the threads are laid down two together, and are stitched across at regular intervals. The next two threads are then placed together by the side, the fastening stitches being taken at the same distance from each other, but so as to occur exactly between the previous couplings, thus giving the effect of brickwork.

Diaper couchings are much used in old church embroideries for representing pavements, figures of saints, and backgrounds to emblems. By varying the position of the fastening stitches different patterns may be produced, such as diagonal crossings, diamonds, zigzags, curves, etc. They are properly all gold stitches; but purse silk, thin cord, or even untwisted silk may be used.

Basket stitch is one of the richest and most ornamental of these ancient modes of couching. Rows of "stuffing," manufactured in the form of soft cotton cord, are laid across the pattern and firmly secured. Across these are placed gold threads, two at a time, and these are stitched down over each two rows of stuffing. The two gold threads are turned at the edge of the pattern, and brought back close to the last, and fastened in the same way. Three double rows of gold may be stitched over the same two rows of stuffing. The next three rows must be treated as brick stitch, and fastened exactly between the previous stitchings, and so on, until the whole space to be worked is closely covered with what appears to be a golden wicker-work. Strong silk must be used for the stitching. Basket stitch is mostly used now for church embroidery, but it is often applied with admirable effect to small articles of luxury, such as ornamental pockets, caskets, etc. The Spanish school of embroidery has always been famed for its excellence in this style, and has never lost the art. The "Embroiderers of the King," as they are called, still turn out splendid specimens of this heavy and elaborate work, which are used for the gorgeous trappings of the horses of the nobility on gala days and state occasions. A beautiful specimen was exhibited at the Royal School of Art-Needlework, in 1878, by the Countess Brownlow, of an altar-hanging, entirely worked in basket stitch, in gold on white satin, and a modern example is still to be seen at the school in a large counterpane, which was worked for the Philadelphia Exhibition from an ancient one also belonging to Lady Brownlow. The Spanish embroiderers used these forms of couching over stuffing with colored silks as well as gold, and produced wonderfully rich effects.

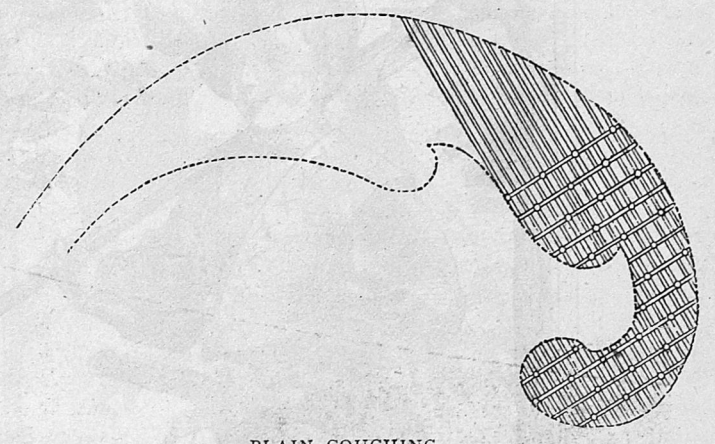
Many fabrics are manufactured in imitation of the older diapered backgrounds, and are largely used to replace them. Among these is the material known as silk brocatine, woven to imitate couched embroidery. The silk is thrown to the surface and is tied with cotton threads from the back. As a ground for embroidery it has an excellent effect. The fabrics known as plain tapestries are a mixture of silk and cotton manufactured in imitation of the hand-worked backgrounds frequently seen in ancient embroideries and in Venetian especially.

HINTS FOR NEEDLEWORK DECORATION.

IN cases where embroidered cushions are required for small and light chairs, it is best to make them up separately from the chair, fastening them securely by little leather straps, or some such device, passing underneath or round the back rails. These may be embroidered in various ways, always remembering that, as they are to be sat upon, very naturally treated flowers are out of place.

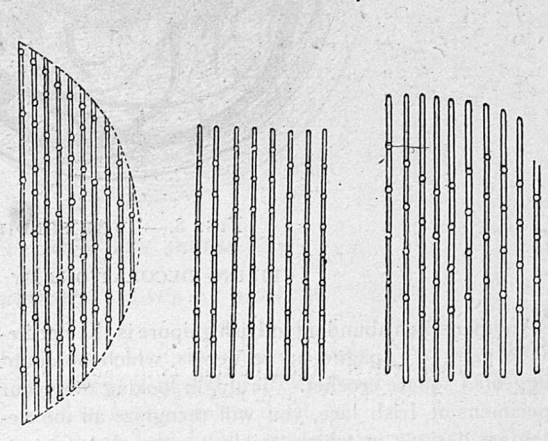
Ecru silk, slightly embroidered in white or red silk, makes pretty washing-tidies; and so does brown linen worked with marking cotton, or ornamented with drawn work. Blue linen is a very good material, as it washes well and the color is improved by it; quite an elaborate ornament in white linen thread may be well bestowed on this very durable material. Tidies also look well on blue linen with a stripe of white linen sewn across the end, on which a pattern is worked in blue; or in one or two shades of pink and red, like a Roman woman's apron. The best models for tidies are embroidered towels and napkins, which were ornamented with much excellent art in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries—that is, during all the time that furnishes us with the best specimens of ancient decorative needlework. Towels ornamented according to the best fashion of the time formed part of the plenishing of every bride, and these, being carefully kept, have often come down to us in good condition.

It is tolerably safe to say that nothing which is to be laid on the floor and trodden underfoot is a very good



PLAIN COUCHING.

subject for embroidery. There is an incongruity in handwork being put to such base uses that we never cease to feel; while the conspicuous effect prevents it being in good taste for articles in such a position. A small mat or rug may sometimes be ornamented in bold embroidery or applied work, or a pattern sewn on in braid. The best models for the decorating of such things will be found in other kinds of floor decoration, such as carpets and woven rugs, mosaics and floor-tiles. If the mat be for a special purpose, such as a flower-stand, or coal-scuttle, the ornament must be a border only, without a centre.



DIAPER COUCHINGS.

Much the same may be said of footstools; they are better made of something other than embroidery; but if it be used, and it is a better use than for rugs, the ornament should be flat and unshaded. An embroidery of worsteds on stout brown linen, or applied work in cloth, is sometimes successful. The latter may be counterchanged with good effect, especially if the two colors do not form too trenchant a contrast.

Braiding is a kind of decoration that can be well applied to rugs, footstools, and other things requiring stout and serviceable work. It has been much discredited of late, partly because it is too easy of execution, and it has been planned without due thought and care;

many patterns have been spoiled by too great an anxiety to avoid cutting the braid and beginning again, and so a false line has been introduced. Other designs require a little embroidery to give them at once point and softness, and very often the contrast between ornament and ground is too great. Thus, in various ways, a kind of work, good and true in itself, has been made offensive; but when we have forgotten its misuse, braiding, or the sewing on of any applied material in lines, will probably be found a valuable means of decoration.

Couvre-pieds, or small coverlets used for a sofa, may be made very pretty with needlework. As they must be lined and wadded, serge and crewels are too heavy for them, though a light serge worked with filosel may be nice; silk and satin are good materials, and cashmere, though not a very good ground for embroidery, may be well used for this purpose. Thick satin-turk is a beautiful material for embroidery, and makes a handsome couvre-pied in gold color, with an ornament in which the colors are pale pink and blue, and dark red-brown, picked out with gold thread; in bronze-green, with lemon-yellow flowers and green leaves, this material is also very satisfactory.

Sofa coverlets may be ornamented in various ways. A border looks well, and so does an ornament covering the whole. A centre quilted in a pattern, with an embroidered border, also looks nice. Silk of a light color, quilted, and having a light pattern worked over the quilting, is suitable and dainty for a small coverlet. A pretty one has been made in tussore silk, worked with gold-colored filosel, with a pattern of flowers inclosed in heart-shaped divisions; this had a quilted lining of gold-colored silk.

CUT-WORK OR APPLIQUÉ.

DECORATIVE cut-work is of infinite variety, but may be divided into two groups, "inlaid appliqué" and "onlaid appliqué." These are thus described by Mrs. L. G. Higgin, Secretary of the Royal School of Art Needlework:

"Inlaid" appliqué consists in tracing the same pattern on two different fabrics, say a gold cloth and a crimson velvet; then cutting both out carefully, and inlaying the gold flowers into the crimson velvet ground, and the crimson flowers into the gold ground. This kind of work may be seen constantly in Italian rooms of the seventeenth century, and the alternate breadths of crimson and gold give a very fine effect, as of pilasters, and in general are enriched by a valance applied at the top, and a plain border at the bottom. The inlaid part is sewed down with thread, and covered with cord or couchings of floss silk. Sometimes narrow ribbons or fine strips of cut silk are stitched over the edges to keep them down flat.

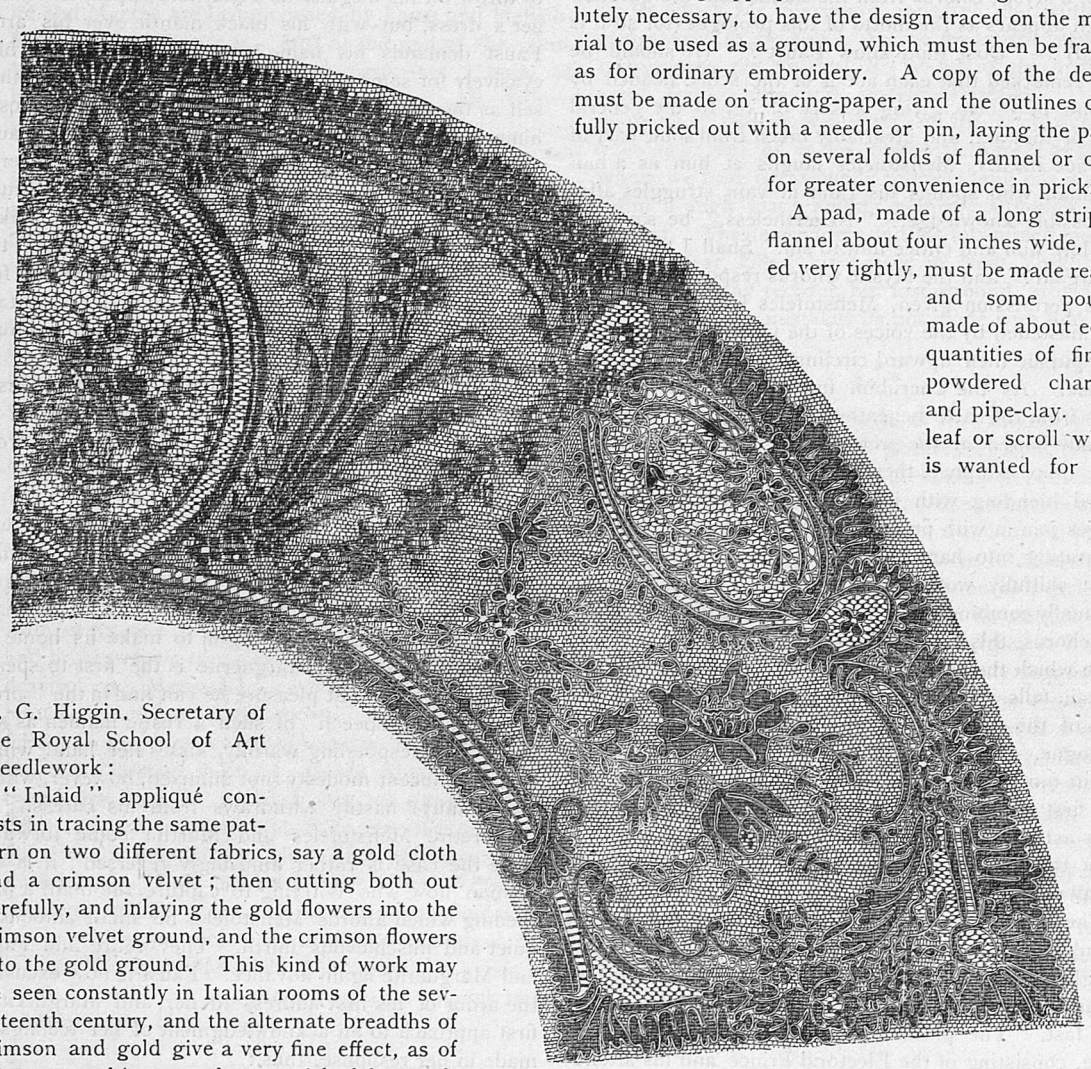
"Onlaid" appliqué is done by cutting out the pattern in one or many colored materials, and laying it down on an intact ground of another material. Parts are often shaded with a brush, high lights and details worked in with stitches of silk, and sometimes whole flowers or figures are embroidered, cut out, and couched down. This sort of work is extremely amusing, and gives scope to much play of fancy and ingenuity, and when artistically composed it is sometimes very beautiful.

Another style of "onlaid appliqué" is only worked in solid outlines, laid down in ribbon or cord, sometimes in both. This was much in vogue in the time of Queen Anne, and for a hundred years after. The ribbon, very soft and thick, sometimes figured, sometimes plain, was manufactured with a stout thread on each side, which could be drawn, and so regulate the ribbon and enable it to follow the flow of the pattern. The Germans, French, and Italians often enriched this style of work with a flower, embroidered and applied, thrown in here and there. Very small fringes, also, were introduced into the pattern, or arabesqued.

"Cut-work," like the appellation "feather-stitch," has a totally different meaning when it is given to white embroidery, and it has nothing to do with appliqué, but takes its name from the fact that the pattern is mostly cut or punched out, and then edged with button-hole or plain overlaid stitch.

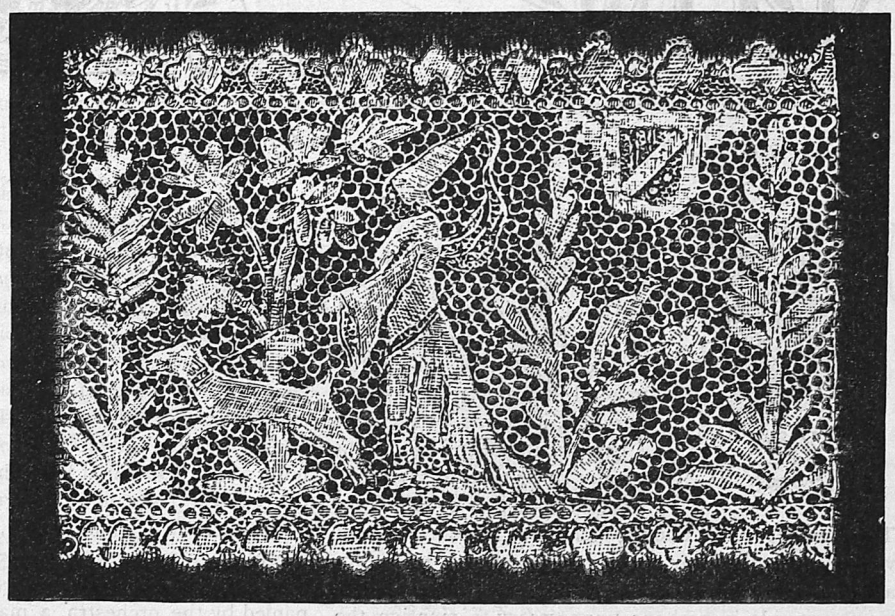
In working appliqué, it is best, although not absolutely necessary, to have the design traced on the material to be used as a ground, which must then be framed as for ordinary embroidery. A copy of the design must be made on tracing-paper, and the outlines carefully pricked out with a needle or pin, laying the paper on several folds of flannel or cloth for greater convenience in pricking.

A pad, made of a long strip of flannel about four inches wide, rolled very tightly, must be made ready, and some pounce made of about equal quantities of finely-powdered charcoal and pipe-clay. The leaf or scroll which is wanted for the work must now be selected, and the pricked design laid face downward on the fabric which is to be applied. The flannel pad must be dipped in the pounce and rubbed well into the outlines of the pricked design, which must be held firmly in its place with the left hand. On lifting the tracing-paper, the design will be found to be marked out on the material distinctly enough for it to be cut out with sharp scissors.



IMITATION LACE FAN DESIGN.

The leaf or scroll having been thus cut out must be fastened in its place on the design with small pins, and then carefully sewed down. The edges are then finished off by stitches of embroidery or by a couching line. The stems are frequently worked in with stem stitching or couching, and the leaves enriched by large veinings of crewel or silk work, or in conventional designs, with some of the many varieties of herring-boning.



NORMANDY POINT-LACE. EXHIBITED AT THE PARIS EXHIBITION OF 1878.

FAN DECORATION.

ALTHOUGH painting is the first decoration for fans, embroidery comes next; and it is superior to lace in everything but the fine and light texture of the latter. Antique embroidered fans are found in every collection, and the revival of needlework has produced some very choice specimens. Satin is the best material. A special kind is made for the purpose, and none other is available. It is very fine and must be closely woven, as it will not fold evenly unless the satin is thin, and yet it must be rich enough to sustain the fine embroidery, without pulling, or looking poor. Crêpe and gauze can also be used. The material must be very exactly framed, with ample margins, and the shape of the fan drawn upon it exactly square with the threads. The work must be the finest and most delicate possible, and the pattern must be very light, so that the work may not be in too large masses. The decoration is best studied from good painted fans, always remembering that you cannot work nearly so much as you can paint. The adaptation of color and forms to the shape, size, and use of a fan must be carefully considered. The chief difficulty is to get the ornament sufficiently light. Flowers are the best decoration; sprays, or running patterns of honeysuckle, clematis, violets, or jasmine, make good ornament. Little ties of ribbon, very light monograms, which are better mixed with flowers than composed of them, butterflies, dragon-flies, and tiny birds, will all serve to make a variety in the decoration. Such a pattern as that arranged for a piano-front may be adapted to a fan, and little bouquets and sprays, united by a ribbon in the Louis XV. style, can also be used. Fans will give much opportunity for the devices by which good workers contrive to express their object with the fewest possible touches; such, for instance, as working the blue or pink edges of a convolvulus flower in one or two shades, and leaving the light ground for the white centre of the flower; or working the veins and outline only of a leaf. Leaves also may often be more lightly and sketchily worked than the flowers to which they are an adjunct. The design in the supplement of THE ART AMATEUR last month for decorating a fan in pen-and-ink is equally adapted for outline embroidery.

The imitation English point-lace fan, for which a design is given herewith, is made of fine figured tulle. The design is back-stitched around with silk in relief. The model gives a little over half the fan, the unfinished medallion forming the centre-piece. This pretty work is quite easy to make. An old worn fan may be renovated and made elegant by the use of this lace. It is sewed against colored silk.